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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 000174

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TAGS: PREL ASEC PTER SNAR PGOV PBTS PINR SOCI UZ
SUBJECT: SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION OFFICIALS
DISCUSS COUNTERTERRORISM EFFORTS

REF: IIR 6 939 001

Classified By: Poloff Steven Prohaska for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Ambassador Norland and Emboffs met with the Executive Committee of the Regional Antiterrorist Structure (RATS) of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on January 31. Executive Committee officials provided a rundown on the structure, responsibilities, and key officials of the RATS. The SCO is planning to put additional effort into collaboration with other states. RATS officials expressed interest in active cooperation with Embassy Tashkent. They appeared to be especially interested in the issue of Afghanistan. The SCO is considering the development of a "cordon" around the country's borders to counter the outflow of narcotics. While the exact form of the cooperation that the SCO envisions with the U.S. is unclear, these officials seem eager to maintain a dialogue on counterterrorism and counternarcotics issues, and further discussions may indicate whether cooperation will serve our mutual interests. End summary.

¶2. (C) Ambassador Norland and Emboffs including DATT met with the Executive Committee of the Regional Antiterrorist Structure (RATS) of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on January 31. (Note: Tashkent has hosted the RATS--one of the SCO's two permanent bodies--since 2004. End note.) The Director of the Executive Committee of the RATS, Mirzakan Usurkanovich Subanov, began with a brief overview of the history of the SCO, and the RATS' objectives of combating separatism, terrorism, and extremism through coordinating the special services and law enforcement activities of the SCO member states.

RATS: Structure, Responsibilities, and Key Officials

¶3. (C) A RATS Council determines the main objectives of the

RATS and directs the activities of the Executive Committee, Subanov continued. The RATS gathers and analyzes information, which it provides to the various law enforcement bodies of the SCO, and facilitates antiterrorist activities and exercises as well as criminal investigations. Subanov then introduced the members of the Executive Committee, noting that all six member states of the SCO were represented, as is the case with the Beijing-based SCO Secretariat. Director Subanov is from Kyrgyzstan, while his

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two deputies, Mr. Valeriy Sergeevich Kravchenko and Mr. Fen Xiguan, are from Russia and China. (Note: A smooth, cheerful official, Kravchenko had been quick to hand out business cards to each member of the delegation. An Embassy LES later told Poloff that Kravchenko is probably a former FSB officer, and that his Russian predecessor certainly was. End note.) Subanov said that Kravchenko was heading up a new SCO initiative to improve international cooperation and outreach, and advised the Embassy delegation to speak with him if it had any questions. Other members of the Executive Committee include Mr. Yolbars Sheraliyevich Sheraliyev (Uzbekistan), Mr. Erken Madeniyetovich Musahanov (Kazakhstan), and Mr. Abdumazhitovich Alimov (Tajikistan).

SCO Involvement in Afghanistan, North Caucasus

¶4. (C) Ambassador Norland asked the officials to comment on any RATS activity vis a vis Afghanistan and the North Caucasus, and whether RATS looked at socioeconomic issues in addition to law enforcement and intelligence. He also asked how the SCO would view intelligence-sharing with NATO on counterterrorism.

¶5. (C) Director Subanov appeared uneasy, and replied that these were very specific questions. He said that those RATS officials present were from the Executive Committee and only carry out the orders of their superiors. The Executive Committee could not answer these questions without the consent of the Council. Subanov said that RATS also interacts with other organizations including the United Nations, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, and holds regular meetings with accredited Ambassadors from the SCO member states.

¶6. (C) The Ambassador asked Subanov how he assessed the terror threat in Central Asia. Subanov said he could only answer from his point of view. He then conferred quietly with his Russian and Chinese deputies. Russian deputy Kravchenko spoke first, addressing some of the Ambassador's earlier questions, while Subanov appeared to carefully consider his response. Kravchenko stressed the SCO's interest in countering separatism, terrorism, and extremism, and noted repeatedly that SCO heads of state had praised the work of the RATS. The information in the counterterrorism database is intended only for the six members of the SCO. At a summit last year in Bishkek, the SCO heads of state agreed that the RATS should play a greater role in Afghanistan and counternarcotics. The RATS is also interested in receiving any kind of counterterrorism information from the United States, he continued, and said that anything the U.S. was prepared to offer would be welcome. The SCO is interested not just in cooperation among its members, but with other states as well. Kravchenko said that the SCO member states sympathized with the United States after the events of September 11 and recommended that both cooperate against terrorism. Turning to the Ambassador's question about the North Caucasus, Kravchenko said that yes, RATS does gather information on extremism there, which it distributes to member states, and the RATS has specialists working on that issue. He said that it was important to review lessons learned in other countries and to try to learn from counterterrorism exercises.

¶7. (C) Chinese Deputy Xiguan spoke next, first noting that he was happy to meet with the United States delegation. Xiguan

said that the RATS had connections with many accredited international organizations that deal with counterterrorism and counternarcotics issues. The RATS also pays close attention to the situation in Afghanistan, and counternarcotics is a key aspect in their analysis of this. Afghanistan is an important source of narcotics, Xiguan said, and he asked the Ambassador his opinion of conditions in Afghanistan.

RATS Director Pessimistic About Afghanistan

¶ 8. (C) Then Director Subanov spoke. In his opinion, the Coalition forces' objectives in Afghanistan had not been fulfilled. The Taliban is still active. Coalition forces are focused on self-protection. Poppy is still being harvested. These are complicated tasks for the Coalition to tackle. Look at how much time has passed, he asked. Subanov said that terrorism was under control on the territories of the member states of the SCO, and as President Putin has said, the situation in the Caucasus is under control. Nevertheless, the members of the SCO that border Afghanistan are concerned about the situation there.

¶ 9. (C) The Ambassador indicated that further discussion on Afghanistan would be welcome. He outlined our multi-faceted approach, which addresses regional security, political, and economic issues, and he highlighted the link between lack of governmental control and serious narcotics problems.

¶ 10. (C) Leaning forward, Director Subanov said that Afghanistan was an exceptionally difficult issue and that he had also served in Afghanistan in the old days. The Soviets had sent 120,000 troops, but still could not control Afghanistan. Soviet troops would conduct operations, free some villages, and return to their bases, but terrorists would again reoccupy these villages. The problem of Afghanistan is never-ending, he said, but we must find ways to resolve problematic issues including government corruption and the fears of the people. However, he later privately agreed with the Ambassador's observation that Coalition forces are not seen as "occupiers" by most Afghans and that it would be a disaster if NATO/ISAF troops left the country.

An "Iron Curtain" Descending on Afghanistan?

¶ 11. (C) Deputy Director Kravchenko said that billions of dollars have been spent to normalize Afghanistan, and asked whether there were statistics on how successful these efforts have been. It is difficult to get peasants to grow wheat when drugs are so much more profitable, he said. Kravchenko then said that, according to the media, poppy production had been much lower under the Taliban. The members of the SCO are now discussing establishing a "cordon" around Afghanistan. He asked whether the Coalition was also interested in forming a cordon around the country to improve border security. There are no manufacturers inside Afghanistan making precursor chemicals. If the borders are controlled inside, and other states form a cordon outside of the country's borders, the outflow of drugs could stop, he argued.

¶ 12. (C) The Ambassador cited concrete achievements in Afghanistan including the pending completion of the Ring Road and the beginning of work on a network of secondary roads, as well as increased educational opportunities for women and declining infant mortality and childbirth death rates. It would not be possible or advisable to have an "iron curtain" around Afghanistan. Instead, the Ambassador recommended a two-pronged approach that promoted a proper border management regime as envisaged in the Border Management Initiative and work on improving conditions in the country. It was vital to buy time by tackling the issues on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border which contributed to the suicide bomber phenomenon. The Ambassador suggested continuing exchanges with the SCO on these issues in the future.

¶13. (C) Director Subanov said that this had been a good exchange and he hoped to meet again. The Executive Committee of the RATS is ready to cooperate actively with the Ambassador and the representatives of the Embassy, he said. Subanov reminded the delegation that Deputy Director Kravchenko was the person to contact on international issues.

Comment:

¶14. (C) This is not the first time members of the SCO have hinted at cooperation with the United States against terrorism, but it is unclear whether they envision cooperation as a two-way street. (An Uzbek diplomat also suggested to Poloff in December that the United States and SCO cooperate in the future given their shared interests.) The SCO does appear to be expanding its international outreach efforts. These efforts may be intended at least in part to increase publicity for and bolster the legitimacy of the organization internationally. Despite their initial reluctance to discuss specific issues, the members of the Executive Committee appeared to be quite interested in addressing problems in Afghanistan.

¶15. (C) This meeting was also useful for its clues on how the decision-making process in the SCO RATS works. The RATS Executive Committee itself seems to have little authority over broader SCO policy relative to the RATS Council.

¶16. (C) From our discussion, it is difficult to judge just how much progress the SCO has made in developing RATS into a viable counterterrorism body. While SCO officials have frequently touted the creation of a counterterrorism database and have praised the work of the structure in the press, this data is available only to SCO member states. It is worth noting that they did not mention any specific terrorist organizations during the course of the meeting--not the IMU, IJU, ETM, or even Al-Qaeda. As evidence of RATS' probable low activity, Chinese officials in Tashkent recently approached the U.S. DATT with questions about regional terrorist organizations (reftel). It was clear from the Chinese questioning that the RATS was not a well-used resource for the Chinese Embassy. Other SCO member DATTs have made similar comments. (Note: The Chinese Ambassador here recently informed one of our local staff that he is very pleased with recent contacts between our missions in general and would like to continue them. End note.)

¶17. (C) Further discussions with RATS officials--and it appears that they are quite willing to maintain this dialogue with the Embassy--may shed further light on what concrete accomplishments this body has achieved and whether future cooperation can serve our mutual interests.

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